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Opening extract from
**Marsh Road Mysteries: Diamonds
and Daggers**

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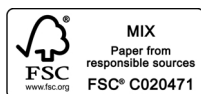
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Chapter One

Piotr Domek was pretending not to look. He sat with his back to the salon window, pretending he hadn't a care in the world, pretending this was any other regular, normal, ordinary kind of day. He wasn't watching the street outside. No way. He couldn't let Minnie think that. The only reason he had the mirror angled in his hand was because he was checking his fringe. He wasn't using the mirror to keep a careful, fixed, watchful eye on the street. Definitely not.

'You're watching, aren't you?' Minnie asked.

Minnie knew him very well.

Piotr and Minnie and Andrew had been friends since the first day of playgroup, when Andrew had painted them all blue before the nursery nurse noticed and they all had to be changed into lost-property clothes. Hanging out with Andrew had meant a lot of lost-property clothes over the years.

'I'm not watching,' Piotr lied.

'You are.'

'Am not.'

'Are too.'

They might have carried on like that all day, or at least until teatime, if Minnie's mum hadn't come out of the back room of the salon to tell them to be quiet. 'I'm on the phone with a supplier and I can't hear myself think,' she said.

Piotr and Minnie clamped their mouths shut. Minnie sat back down by the nail bar. There were no customers booked in, so she could reorganise her mum's nail varnishes however she liked. 'I'm going to arrange them by which looks the most like poison,' she whispered. She picked up a jet-black bottle first.

Piotr leaned back in the window seat, pushing a copy of *Afro Hair* magazine out of the way. He angled the mirror again. Minnie made a snorty noise. Piotr ignored her.

Outside, reflected in the glass, he could see Marsh Road market in full swing. The pedestrianised zone was busy with shoppers.

Then he saw a small figure in the distance, running. The small figure was waving something above its head.

Piotr tried not to look around. Minnie would tease him forever if he did. The figure in the mirror turned into a short, white boy, wearing glasses, with dark hair flopping all over the place as he ran.

Andrew.

Piotr tried to sit still. He tried to look bored. He tried to –

Piotr dropped the mirror on the seat, flipped around and stared out of the window. ‘He’s coming!’

Minnie paused with a bottle of green, glittery gunk in her hand. ‘I knew it! You were looking! Ha! You do know he’s going to be a nightmare now, don’t you?’

Piotr watched Andrew pelting towards them. The object above his head was a newspaper and he waved it as though he were batting off a swarm of wasps.

Andrew burst into the salon.

His normally moon-pale face was pink from the effort of running. And breathing. And trying to speak. He couldn’t manage all three. He waved the newspaper instead.

‘She’s here,’ he finally managed to wheeze.

‘Who?’ Minnie teased.

‘Who? *Who*? Look! *She*’s here!’ He unfolded the paper so that they could see the front page. ‘Betty Massino, world-famous actress, star of blockbuster hits like

Breakout on Mars and *Toy Club*, Oscar nominated, walker of red carpets and papped by paparazzi everywhere. Betty Massino. *The Betty Massino!* She's only gone and arrived in our town!' Andrew clutched the newspaper to his chest as if he were accepting an Oscar.

'Betty Massino ... Betty Massino,' Minnie muttered. 'Yes, I think I might have heard that name before.'

'Argh!' Andrew gave a cry of pure frustration.

Minnie got up from the nail bar and snatched the newspaper from Andrew's hands like a seagull nabbing chips from a pigeon.

'Oi!'

She danced away from him, across the black and white tiles, towards the basins. Andrew leaped after her. She held the paper up, towards the display of wigs and hair extensions and wraps. Andrew, yelling now, jumped as high as he could to get it back. But Minnie was a good foot taller. He had no chance.

Minnie's mum called from the treatment room at the back of the shop. 'What's going on there? Do I need to come out?'

Minnie stopped straight, as if Mum had flicked a switch. She handed the newspaper back to Andrew. Minnie knew Mum was on the phone to Big Phil, even

his name made Mum frown every time she said it. Bothering Mum now was deadly.

Andrew carried a cloud of sulk with him as he smoothed down the paper.

‘Show me,’ Piotr said.

Piotr hadn’t got up from the window seat. Usually, it was best to leave Minnie and Andrew to it when they fought. Although they looked so different, they were identical when it came to bickering.

Piotr flattened the paper on his lap. His two friends sat on either side of him and peered in.

The front page showed a photo of Betty Massino arriving outside the theatre at the end of the street. Piotr felt a shiver of excitement. Nothing like Andrew’s full-blown, verging-on-a-heart-attack frenzy, but a thrill just the same.

In the photo, Betty was stepping out of a black car, waving and smiling at the camera. Her dark hair was swept up and her eyes sparkled with glee. A young man in a dark grey jumper held her luggage. They were both in front of the Theatre Grande, less than three minutes’ walk from Minnie’s mum’s salon.

A Hollywood actress here! Piotr could hardly believe it. It felt like a twinkling star had fallen from the night sky

and landed in Marsh Road. Nothing as brilliant as this had ever happened in their sleepy little town before.

‘Read it,’ Andrew instructed.

Piotr did as he was told. “‘Betty Massino, star of stage and screen, arrived this morning at the Theatre Grande to join the cast of *The Road to Moscow*. Betty is temporarily returning to the town where her grandparents lived before emigrating to America. Seen here with her assistant, Ms Massino will take the lead role of tragic widow, Natasha Arcadina. Ms Massino told reporters that she feels she’s come home and can’t wait to begin rehearsals.’”

Andrew’s grin was huge. This was the best thing ever.

‘Betty’s here ... so?’ Minnie asked.

‘So? So?’ Andrew was indignant. ‘Is that all you can say? This is only about the most exciting, most astounding thing that’s ever happened to us in our whole lifetimes.’

‘But it hasn’t happened to us, has it? She’s just in town.’

‘This will change the summer.’

‘It changes nothing.’

‘A celebrity in town!’

‘In town, not in our lives!’

Piotr let them slug it out. He picked up the

now-forgotten paper and looked at the photo. Betty had a nice smile, friendly. Travelling hadn't given her a crinkly face from falling asleep on a pile of coats, the way it did normal people.

'Piotr's dad can!'

Piotr looked up as Andrew said his name. He hadn't been listening. 'My dad can what?' he asked.

Andrew gave another dramatic sigh. 'I *said* that your dad can introduce us. He works at the theatre.'

Piotr sighed. Not this again. Andrew had been talking about Dad's job for weeks and weeks, ever since he learned Betty was coming. This had 'lost-property-clothing disaster' written all over it.

'Dad can't introduce us. He works as security,' Piotr said. 'He's always on the stage door. He never goes anywhere near the actual stage – you know that.'

It wasn't as if they hadn't had this conversation about two hundred billion times already this holiday.

Andrew clasped his hands together, in a silent prayer. 'But he could this once, couldn't he? For us? You'll ask him, won't you?' Andrew fell to his knees, begging Piotr to do this one, tiny, small, totally impossible thing.

Minnie tutted. 'You'll get covered in hair clippings if you roll around down there. I haven't swept up yet.'

‘Please say you’ll ask him. Please? Pretty please with bows on?’

Piotr glanced at the photo. Could he ask Dad to introduce them to Betty? ‘Even if I did ask, he’d say no,’ Piotr said.

‘Does that mean you’ll ask?’ Andrew said. ‘Yes!’ He punched the air.

Piotr hung his head. He’d walked right into that. He was an idiot. Now, Andrew wasn’t going to let it drop, ever. ‘Dad won’t do it, though, I’m telling you.’

‘Will you ask him now?’ Andrew bounded up.

‘You want to go to the theatre now?’ Piotr frowned. It was usually better to ask Dad for things in more roundabout ways. Subtle. Planned. Not just tearing in like a hyperactive whirlwind. Dad wasn’t mean, not at all. He just preferred to stick to the rules, to do things by the book.

‘Yes,’ Andrew said. ‘We should go right now. This could be it – my big Hollywood break. If I can impress Betty then she might let me have a role in her next film. I could be the next James Bond.’

‘You could be the next James Pond,’ Minnie muttered.

Andrew looked so hopeful that Piotr found he felt a tiny bit hopeful too. Maybe Dad *would* let them into the

theatre. Maybe he *would* take them to Betty Massino's dressing room. Maybe Andrew *would* get to play the most famous spy ever, running around stopping baddies and saving the world. Yes, and maybe that was a flying pig hovering over Marsh Road.

Piotr sighed. 'Don't get your hopes up.'

Andrew whooped.

'I said, don't get your hopes up!'

Minnie went to the back to tell Mum they were leaving.

Then the three headed out to try and meet one of the most famous people in the world.